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LAOS: Four Phases to Nonexistence

THE hesitation waltz went on last week in Laos. Neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma flew in from Paris, but threatened that unless he got the neutralist coalition government he wanted by June 15, he would fly back to France—probably for good. Red Prince Souphanouvong remained in the Communist-held north, issuing occasional bulletins to the effect that he would be delighted to join Souvanna's coalition. But the other vital ingredients—pro-Western Prince Boun Oum and right-wing General Phoumi Nosavan—were missing. Continuing their junketing round of Southeast Asian nations in search of money and sympathy, the two arrived at Manila, where they got plenty of sympathy. Neutralism, declared President Diosdado Macapagal, "is the gateway to Communism." He found it incomprehensible, he said, that the U.S. in Laos was giving support to neutralists like Souvanna Phouma and withholding aid from staunch anti-Communists like his guests.

The questions raised by Macapagal are frequently heard in the U.S. One reason that the Administration's answers seem to carry little conviction is that, since its inception, the Laos problem has been murky, full of U.S. policy reversals and disagreements. The record:

Phase One: Coalition. Though it has a king, a government and an army and can be found on a map, Laos does not really exist. Many of its estimated 3,000,000 people would be astonished to be called Laotians, since they know themselves to be Miao or Black Thai or Khalong tribesmen. It is a land without a railroad, a single paved highway or a newspaper. Its chief cash crop is opium.

Laos was dreamed up by French Diplomat Jean Chauvel, who in 1946 was France's Secretary-General of Foreign Affairs. At the time, France was trying to reassert its authority in Indo-China, whose rebellious inhabitants had no desire to return to their prewar status as colonial subjects. In place of original Indo-China, consisting of various kingdoms and principalities, Paris put together three new autonomous states within the French Union: Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos. Drawing lines on a map, Chauvel created Laos by merging the rival kingdoms of Luangprabang, whose monarch became King of Laos, with Champasak, whose pretender was consoled by being made permanent Inspector General of the new state.

French influence did not long survive the drawing of the map. Nine years later, with the humiliating defeat of Dienbienphu, France withdrew from Indo-China, and the fledgling state of Laos was on its own, along with the other remnant states of partitioned Indo-China. Independence was complicated by the fact that two Laotian provinces were securely in the hands of Communist Pathet Lao bands under Red Prince Souphanouvong. In 1950 his half-brother, Prince Souvanna Phouma, was chosen Premier and soon integrated the two Red provinces into the kingdom by giving Souphanouvong a Cabinet post. In a subsequent national election, the Reds increased their strength by taking nine of 21 contested seats in the National Assembly.

Phase Two: Move to the Right. This surge of Communist power alarmed the Eisenhower Administration, then engaged in trying to help President Ngo Dinh Diem of neighboring South Viet Nam preserve a pro-Western government against Red aggression. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had tried to seal off Southeast Asia by building the SEATO pact and encouraging anti-Communist allies. The U.S. Ambassador to Laos, J. Graham Parsons, distrusted Premier Souvanna Phouma both as a neutralist and a compromiser with the Reds. Withholding U.S. economic aid was enough to cause Souvanna's downfall, and he was replaced by a pro-Western Premier. A U.S. military mission was invited to Laos, and hard-working CIA men soon discovered in right-wing General Phoumi Nosavan a

dedicated anti-Communist who displayed more signs of organizing ability and drive than most Laotians.

Phoumi Nosavan set up a militant, conservative party, and Red Prince Souphanouvong was jailed for treason. In the rigged national elections of 1960, Phoumi's group gained a sweeping majority. On the surface, a relatively tough U.S. policy of containing Communism seemed to be an overwhelming success.

But some \$250 million in U.S. economic and military aid had too heady an effect on the Laotian government, which was soon reeling with corruption. Promised reforms never materialized, and practically no funds reached the peasants and forest tribes. The Communist Pathet Lao guerrilla bands began raiding in the north. Red Prince Souphanouvong not only walked out of jail, but took most of his prison guards with him. In August 1960, an obscure paratroop captain named Kong Le staged a military coup in Vientiane and returned Souvanna Phouma to power as Premier. General Phoumi Nosavan, with his CIA advisers, retreated to his southern stronghold of Savannakhet.

Phase Three: Right Defeated. At this point, the State Department, on the advice of new U.S. Ambassador Winthrop Brown, just about concluded that Laos could only be kept from continual eruption by working toward a coalition of the opposing forces in the country. But the CIA and the U.S. military mission in the field disagreed, opposed dealing with any Laotian leader who seemed soft on Communism. They argued that the U.S.-trained and equipped Royal Laotian Army of 28,000 men under General Phoumi was the only bulwark against a Red takeover. The Pentagon generally backed the CIA, but with the proviso that, under no conditions, should U.S. armed forces be plunged into the landlocked, trackless jungles of Laos.

With U.S. encouragement, Phoumi Nosavan in December 1960 launched a northward drive against Kong Le's paratroop battalion in Vientiane. It was about the only victory Phoumi Nosavan had ever won. Kong Le retreated to the strategic Plaine des Jarres, joining forces with the Pathet Lao. The Soviet Union poured in supplies by air, and Communist North Viet Nam contributed tough guerrilla cadres. When Phoumi's army advanced, it was badly beaten in a series of noisy but largely bloodless battles. Phoumi got a breathing space when, in the spring of 1961, the government eagerly agreed to a cease-fire.

Phase Four: Back to Coalition. There have been bitter complaints in the U.S. that Washington let Phoumi down. In an effort to force him to accept a coalition government, the U.S. stopped paying Laos \$3,000,000 a month in economic aid, but there has never been any skimping in U.S. equipment and the training of Phoumi's Royal Laotian Army. The grim truth—as shown again last month at Nam Tha—is that Phoumi's men simply will not fight. Some observers suggest Phoumi actually wanted his army to collapse in order to force U.S. intervention—perhaps relying on President Kennedy's March 1961 telecast, when he said that a Red takeover in Laos would "quite obviously affect the security of the U.S."

At any rate, two-thirds of Laos is now in Communist hands. The only middle way between either sending U.S. troops into Laos or letting the country go to the Reds by default, Washington holds, is to bring about Laotian neutrality, however precarious or short-lived it may be. Theoretically, the Russians are committed to the same policy. But the U.S. has now clearly set up main lines of resistance in Thailand and South Viet Nam, and has let the Red bloc know that any further advance in Southeast Asia will be met by U.S. troops as well as U.S. equipment.

In Laos, however, Washington finds itself in the discouraging position of striving to achieve what already existed four years ago.